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Working

Washington's Best En

At These Six Companies, the Pay and Benefits Are Good. Even More Important, People Care and Are Challenged.

Walking up the ramp to the back entrance of Giant Food's Landover headquarters one rainy day, Lisa Hall slipped and fell. She wasn't hurt, but she was upset. When she got to her desk in the accounting department, she picked up the phone and dialed the office of company chairman Israel Cohen. As usual, Izzy Cohen answered the phone himself. The next day the ramp was carpeted.

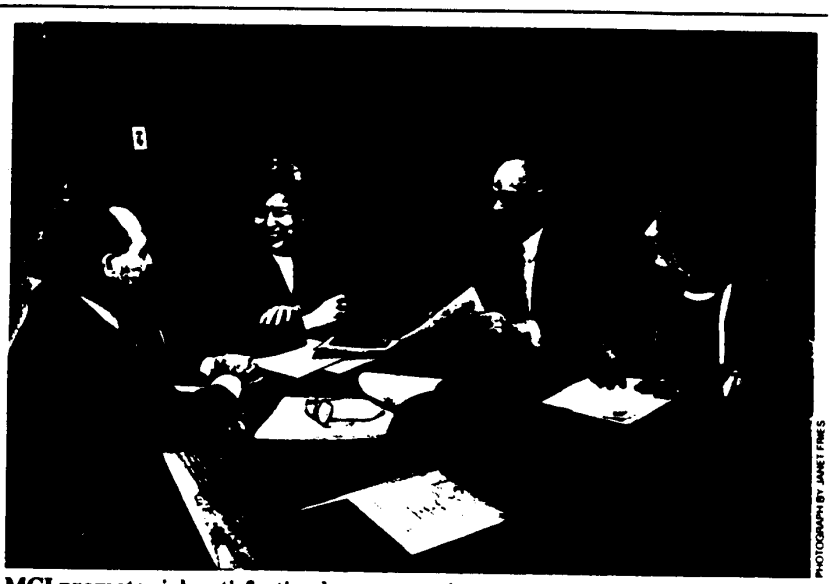
Everyone answers his or her phone at Giant Food, and no one hesitates to take problems or suggestions to the top. This "open door" between employees and management is cited more often than salary and benefits by Giant personnel in describing why the compar one of the best places to work in Was. n.

Not that salary and benefi n't important. All six of the compar we selected as the best to work for i this area pay competitive salaries and offer superior benefits. But management's responsiveness to the needs, ideas, and goals of its employees most often made the difference in job satisfaction. Not surprisingly, the companies we found with the most enthusiastic employees are among the most successful in the area.

Much the same was true of the corporations profiled in the 1984 book *The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America*. Not a single Washington-based company made that list. But our research shows that some local companies are every bit as good as those selected by the book's authors.

When we began work on this article, we asked hundreds of people to recommend good employers. We concentrated on larger, locally based companies on the theory that big employers are better able to offer good benefits packages and provide more employment opportunities. This focus excluded many well-run small firms, professional offices, trade associations, and major companies such as IBM and Time Inc. (both of which made the national list) that employ many Washingtonians but are headquartered elsewhere.

We contacted 51 of the companies most highly recommended in our initial survey. Several of those then eliminated themselves. Some, such as PEPCO, did not want to be involved. Others, such as USAir, wouldn't arrange employee groups for us to talk with. And still others, such as Vitro Corporation, refused to disclose employee benefits.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JANET FRIES

MCI promotes job satisfaction by encouraging communication from the top down and the bottom up. Here, employees discuss an in-house publication. From left: Ken Cox, corporate news-bureau manager; Shirley Robinson, senior manager of corporate affairs; Wade Allen, furniture coordinator; senior vice president Ken Cox; and staff assistant Cindy Palmer.

Among the remaining candidates, we interviewed dozens of employee groups. A few, such as the group from Dynalectron, were so unenthusiastic about their companies that we struck them from consideration. Most employees we talked to had both good and bad things to say about their places of work. Finally, we selected the six companies that seemed to have the strongest combination of employee benefits, enthusiasm, and job satisfaction.

As we talked to one employee group after another, it became clear that successful organizations share certain employee-oriented practices.

First, people like to work for companies that have strong, charismatic, even-handed leaders. Bill McGowan at MCI, Izzy Cohen at Giant, Bill Marriott at the Marriott Corporation—all the CEOs of the best companies to work for are regarded by their employees as hard-working, caring, and fair. They have fostered organizations that care both about company performance and the people behind it. They have motivated their employees by example; their passion for quality is evident throughout their companies.

The happiest employees we talked with had a clear sense of where their organizations were going and how they fit into that plan. That means communication—from top to bottom and bottom to top. Employees need to be able to pass ideas, suggestions, and complaints to someone who can act on them—whether that person is the company president or the next supervisor up the ladder. At Giant, because everyone answers his own phone, passing an idea to the top means dialing four digits.

Employees also need to know what management is thinking. MCI's senior-management notes are available to everyone, including the company's furniture movers, and any employee can call

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